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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 000431

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [KDEM](#) [KCRM](#) [BG](#) [BG](#) [BGD](#)

SUBJECT: A/S ROCCA MEETS WITH BANGLADESH PM ZIA

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Judith Chammas; reason 1.4(d)

11. (C) Summary: In a January 26 meeting with Prime Minister Zia, Assistant Secretary for South Asia Christina Rocca discussed extremism, elections and political violence and delivered the President's letter to the PM. PM Zia reiterated her commitment to speak out forcefully against extremism and to conduct all investigations fully wherever they lead; prosecuting any official against whom hard evidence exists of support for extremism. She reaffirmed BDG plans to establish counter-terrorism units within DGFI and NSI. She promised to support free and fair elections. End summary.

12. (U) A/S Christina Rocca met on January 26 with PM Zia. CDA Judith Chammas and Econoff (note taker) accompanied the A/S. Foreign Minister Morshed Khan, Ambassador to the United States Shamsheer Chowdhury and Secretary to the PM Khadker Shahidul Islam also attended the 45 minute meeting.

Extremism

13. (C) A/S Rocca stressed the need for decisive action against extremism and delivered the President's January 17 letter to the PM.

14. (C) A/S Rocca noted the real concern in Washington about the growth of extremism. Progress with arrests must continue, while investigations should be allowed to run their full course, even if they point to involvement by government officials, she said. It is also important to shut down the organizations that are propagating the extremist message. The USG is prepared to offer technical assistance in response to demonstrated BDG commitment to counter-terrorism.

15. (C) PM Zia stressed the importance Bangladesh places on continued U.S. support and assistance. She vowed to continue to fight extremism, describing it as an "issue of national importance" that should be above political squabbling. She will continue to speak out forcefully against extremist violence, and cited several statements she has made in recent days. Moreover, she said that all major religious leaders were also condemning extremist violence and noted that Industries Minister and Jamaat Islami leader Nizami has also condemned extremist violence.

16. (C) PM Zia assured A/S Rocca that the BDG would continue to pursue vigorously its actions and investigations against militant extremists. "The government will not spare anyone; if hard evidence exists, we will take action no matter who (is involved)," she promised. She asked that the U.S. have confidence in her government and not be misled by "media propaganda."

17. (C) PM Zia confirmed her personal support for establishment of counter-terrorism units within both the Directorate General Forces Intelligence (DGFI) and the National Security Intelligence (NSI), although the exact organizational structure (agency or bureau, for example) has not yet been determined. She welcomed U.S. offers of assistance, specifically requesting training and equipment. A/S Rocca responded with an offer to provide training, saying that is the area where the U.S. believes it can be most helpful. PM Zia gladly accepted the offer and said U.S. officials should discuss specific proposals directly with DGFI, NSI, and the Home Ministry.

Elections

18. (C) A/S Rocca emphasized the importance of free and fair elections to maintaining Bangladesh as a moderate democracy. She urged the government to avoid actions that "stack the deck." More than with any previous election, the international community is watching closely, she said.

19. (C) PM Zia assured A/S Rocca that the government wants free and fair elections; that transparency is in its own best interests. She defended the actions of the election commission (EC) and the structure of the caretaker government against opposition attacks. Repeating stock BDG arguments, she said recent elections for the mayor of Chittagong and the Dinajpur bi-election, both of which the BNP backed candidates lost, demonstrated that the EC was functioning properly. She pointed out the structure of the caretaker government is

unchanged from the last election, when the opposition was in power, yet the opposition did not suggest then the changes they are demanding now. Minister Khan went further, saying people make their own choices and the EC has no influence over their decisions.

Political Violence

110. (C) A/S Rocca told PM Zia that there was continued concern in the U.S. with the growing level of political violence, including the August 21, 2004, attack on Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League leadership and the assassination of Shah Kibria. The Kibria case in particular is receiving a lot of attention from Congress, A/S Rocca pointed out, noting concern that the case seems to have stalled.

111. (C) The PM strongly disagreed with suggestions that political violence had increased over the past 18 months. She pointed to the many peaceful by-elections that had occurred during that period. She cited ongoing investigations of the attack on Sheikh Hasina, despite the continued refusal of the AL to assist with the investigation in any way. Finally, she pointed to the arrest of Mufti Hannan on charges stemming from an earlier assassination attempt on Sheikh Hasina as evidence of the government's commitment to fully prosecute those involved in political violence. Suggestions that BNP officials protected Hannan were baseless, she argued, given his arrest.

112. (C) As for the Kibria case, the PM felt Congressional concern was unfounded. The government had filed charges and pursued the case until stymied by the High Court. The judiciary is independent, there is little we can do, said Minister Khan. Ambassador Chowdhury pointed out he had discussed the case with one concerned Senator, who has not raised further concerns. A/S Rocca suggested the Ambassador might want to approach other concerned Members of Congress, and noted that making sure that justice is done would be in the interest of Bangladesh.

Blame Game Continues

113. (C) With some passion, PM Zia again trotted out her litany of complaints against the Awami League and its leader, Sheikh Hasina. Hasina refuses to engage on any of the issues of national importance, whether terrorism, elections or political violence. She would not accept the PM's letter requesting a dialogue on the rise of extremism. She demands reform of the caretaker government system, but refuses to attend Parliament, where the issue should be discussed. Neither she nor her supporters will support investigations into political violence, refusing to give testimony or even provide access to evidence.

114. (C) Revealing the depth of her personal animosity toward Hasina, the PM blurted out "she started it" with attacks on PM Zia and her party when Sheikh Hasina was in power. We are investigating the attacks against her (citing Hannan), but she blocked investigation of attacks against us, the PM added. A/S Rocca responded that it was important for the PM to take the high road in order to preserve democracy in Bangladesh.

Requests for Senior Visits and Economic Support

115. (C) The PM noted the likely travel of President Bush and Secretary of State Rice to the region and pressed for a stopover in Bangladesh. Minister Khan stressed the important role high level visits play in making the U.S.-Bangladesh relationship visible. A/S Rocca acknowledged the value of high-level visits, but stated that the President unfortunately would not be stopping in Bangladesh in March. There is no indicate yet of a visit by the Secretary.

116. (C) The PM also stressed the importance of economic support and urged U.S. officials to try to include at least some textile tariff lines in the 97% duty free access category under the recent WTO agreement. She pointed out the importance of the ready-made garment (RMG) industry to Bangladesh's economic development and to improving the economic and social condition of women in Bangladesh.

117. (C) A/S Rocca acknowledged the arguments but urged the PM to be realistic. Market access for textiles is a very sensitive domestic political issue and is unlikely to happen, she said. She encouraged Bangladesh to work to continue to diversify its exports and suggested they concentrate on ensuring market access for those products.

118. (U) A/S Rocca has cleared this message.

CHAMMAS